New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1957

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**Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of February 11, 1957*

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NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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"A Visit to a Small Planet"

New York Post

February 8, 1957

By Richard Watts Jr.

2 Funny Men, One From Outer Space

Two of the freshest and most original comic actors anywhere are Cyril Ritchard and Eddie Mayehoff, and they turn "A Visit to a Small Planet" into a very funny vaudeville show. As a satire or even as a play, Gore Vidal's comedy, which opened last night at the Booth Theater, pretty much fades into thin air after the first act, and I suppose the Messrs. Ritchard and Mayehoff are partially responsible for the disappearance, but, whenever this happens, they rush into the breach with gusto and abandon, and things become uproarious enough to make the lapses remarkably bearable.

Mr. Vidal's narrative, which was first seen in a successful television incarnation, begins on a highly promising satirical premise. Into the contemporary world of hydrogen bombs, cold war and military bureaucracy, there drops a dignified gentleman in the picturesque garb of a century ago. It turns out that he is a visitor from superior outer space, who has interested himself as a hobby in our small and backward planet, and, having got mixed up in his historical dates a little, believes he has arrived just in time to take a look at our entertaining Civil War.

The Antagonists

For an act, the playwright has thought up some excellent ideas for his satire, and Mr. Ritchard is just the man to portray the inquisitive traveler from a world far wiser than ours, who is nevertheless somewhat handicapped because, despite his intellectual powers, his emotions have rather withered away. He has an interesting antagonist, too, in the person of a pompous general who is presumably an expert on unidentified flying objects, but whose real concern is with the handling of military laundry. This, of course, is the part played by Mr. Mayehoff.

And how he plays it! It is quite a shameless performance, as a matter of fact; all puffing of cheeks, the making of faces, and strange sounds and noises. But it is also tremendously comic and entirely delightful, and Mr. Mayehoff manages to satirize in one wholesale sweep everything that is pompous, cliche-ridden, fatuous and mentally obtuse. He is not only devastating about it but, in addition, enormously likable and sympathetic, and, as outrageous as this Gen. Tom Powers may be, he is likewise a fellow you are sure to find yourself pulling for.

The Satire

Because the satirical possibilities of Mr. Vidal's comedy start off so promisingly, it seems rather a shame that "A Visit to a Small Planet" turns into a series of vaudeville acts, but I'm not so sure. For the plot does try rearing its head from time to time, and, on these occasions, it appears thin and a little uncertain. Then Mr. Ritchard, with his wonderfully precious comedy style, and Mr. Mayehoff, with his brilliant farcical strokes, go into action either separately or together, and the fun makes one forget that the central satire is getting nowhere.

Although the two remarkable comedians completely dominate the evening, there are excellent performances in supporting roles by Sarah Marshall, Philip Coolidge, Conrad Janis and Bob Gothie, even though the play gives evidence of forgetting all about them quite frequently. In the end, it all goes back to what you want from "A Visit to a Small Planet." It is disappointing as a satirical comedy, but, as a springboard for its pair of superior clowns, it is entertaining vaudeville.

"VISIT TO A SMALL PLANET"

Comedy in three acts and four by Gore Vidal; staged by Cyril Ritchard; setting by Oliver Smith; lighting by Feder; costumes supervised by Patricia Zipprodt; presented by George Axelrod and Clinton Wilder at the Booth Theatre, February 7, 1957. The cast:

Gen. Tom Powers.. Eddie Mayehoff
Roger Spelding.... Philip Coolidge
Reba Spelding..... Sibyl Bowan
Ellen Spelding.... Sarah Marshall
Conrad Mayberry...Conrad Janis
Kreton..... Cyril Ritchard
Aide..... Bob Gothie
Rosemary ..... Grenadier Saadi
Camerman.... Earl Montgomery
Sound Man..... John Hallow
A Friend.... Francis Bethencourt

New York Herald Tribune

February 8, 1957

THEATER

'Visit to a Small Planet'

By WALTER KERR

WHILE I haven't kept exact count, Cyril Ritchard's production of Gore Vidale's "Visit to a Small Planet" seems to me to be composed of some sixty or seventy unusual noises —all of them enchanting.

These noises come, if one's ears can be trusted, from three sources. The most spectacular, but perhaps least interesting, of these is the off stage laboratory from which Louis and Bebe Barron have sent soaring a series of what the program calls "emotional and rather alarming vibrations." Every time a ship lands from outer space, or one of its inhabitants has a private thought, or a rifle mysteriously shoots out of a guard's hands and rises heavenward, all Edison breaks loose in the upper atmosphere. The effect is loud, amusing, and quite appropriate to the nonsense taking place beneath it, but it isn't a patch on the sounds that come from more human sources.

There is, for instance, the infinitely varied cackle that rises from the impenetrable bog of Mr. Ritchard's own throat. Mr. Ritchard, playing hooky from both the Metropolitan Opera House and an unnamed planet rotating majestically in the infinite "trapezoid of time," appears in a red frock coat and a grey top hat, hoping against hope that he has arrived in time for the Battle of Bull Run. (The time of the play, I should mention, is "next summer").

He is no sooner on than he is expressing disappointment with a long, low gurgle that wells up from some old mill stream in the depths of his being, registering shock at the eating habits of human beings with a horrified bleat, conversing with a cat in a comradely purr, and precisely imitating the patient buzz of a bombing plane belligerently crossing the Andes. Nor does this exhaust his repertory. For a second-act curtain he is prepared to drop to one knee, place his hand on his heart, and regale one and all with a liquid, throbbing and absolutely definitive rendition of a number called "Coming in on a Wing and a Prayer."

• • •

Mr. Ritchard is more than a rich and rollicking entertainer. He is a magnanimous director. For he has permitted the lantern-jawed, constitutionally hilarious Eddie Mayehoff to go right ahead and add all sorts of scene-stealing sound-effects of his own. There are heartfelt "whooshes" as Mr. Mayehoff, cast as a Pentagon General who must deal with this newest invasion, indicates baffled, breathless surprise. There is a symphony-orchestra of soap-bubble churnings as Mayehoff lovingly impersonates a mobile laundry unit. There is, indeed, such a magnificent array of nasal whines, blurts, and whinnies that this sterling performer at last seems less a man with a sinus condition than a sinus condition with a man on its trail. The fellow is, in his gee-whiz way, superb.

• • •

By this time I have undoubtedly given the impression that author Gore Vidal has had very little to do with making "Visit to a Small Planet" the gloriously funny evening it is. Mr. Vidal has done quite a lot. He had adopted a brisk, bantering, tongue-in-cheek tone that makes his antic little parable seem impudently plausible. He has written for his principals—and for Sarah Marshall, Sibyl Bowan, Philip Coolidge and Conrad Janis, all of them excellent—an almost endless barrage of freshly-minted quips to keep the merriment rolling.

He hasn't to get down to the one warning I want to give you this morning, written a play that holds together of its own adhesive power. Time and again things get rattled and threaten to sputter: Mr. Vidal and companions must improvise fast. And, this being a piece with a built-in moral about the futility of war, the moral is often on as slippery ground as the plotting. Nervous moments crop up as our playful house-guest begins to play with Russia hydrogen bombs, and the race's out-dated propensity to passion.

Happily, neither "Visit to a Small Planet" nor the audience can keep a straight face for long. It's difficult to quibble when you're being surprised into laughter every minute on the minute.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

February 8, 1957

A Superman Who Came to Dinner

By TOM DONNELLY.

Gore Vidal's "Visit to a Small Planet" (at the Booth) is the rare article, a television play which has gained immeasurably in its transference to the stage. It is not only longer and louder, it is a great deal funnier. A few passages made me rather restless, but most of the time I found myself laughing at just about everything in sight, including, of all things, the love interest.

To be academic about it, "Visit to a Small Planet" is less a play than a vaudeville, and it is carried along by two really first-rate comics, the elegant Cyril Ritchard, and the rough-hewn Eddie Mayehoff.

Mr. Ritchard, repeating his original television role, is a visitor from outer space, Kreton by name, a superman who can do all the tricks of his fictional kind: He can read the thoughts of earthlings, surround himself and his flying saucer with invisible protective walls, etc. Kreton is also a bit of a muddle-head. He keeps getting his time dimension confused. He arrives in the Virginia countryside in a costume of the 1860s, fully expecting to find himself in the midst of the Civil War.

Makes Best of It.

When he discovers that the time is 1957, Kreton cheerfully makes the best of the 20th century, avidly studies his astonished hosts (a pompous radio commentator and his family), and tries to launch a new world war, partly because he attributes to all earthlings a passion for violent conflict, and partly because he is essentially a terribly frivolous individual.

Given a ripe opportunity, Mr. Ritchard makes the glittering most of it. He dashes happily about in gaudy uniforms, promoting global conflict with the abandon of a child contemplating an assault on a bubble-gum factory, announces disdainfully that nobody who is anybody lives on Mars, and has a marvelous time chatting with a Siamese cat on the subject of mice. ("Oh, they live in the WALLS!" he cries, entering the animal's mind.)

While Mr. Ritchard is working the stylish side of the street, Mr. Mayehoff huffs and puffs gloriously along the low comedy route. Mr. Mayehoff plays a general who accomplished great things in the laundry corps, but is now uneasily situated in the Pentagon, surrounded by enemies who will stop at nothing to get his corner office with three windows. Mr. Mayehoff gives us a kind of transcendent caricature of the military man at bay. Physically he suggests a vast jawbone, topped by a pair of small suspicious eyes, with the rest of him a mere afterthought.

Blustering Melancholy.

No other actor I can think of can achieve Mr. Mayehoff's effect of blustering melancholy. He is a riot.

But even the lesser lights in "Visit to a Small Planet" shine brightly. Philip Coolidge is excellent as the radio oracle whose predictions have proved 99 percent inaccurate; Sybil Bowan is fine and dandy as his wife, a lady who responds to inter-planetary invasion with fretful thoughts about the havoc a flying saucer can wreak in her rose garden; Sarah Marshall exhibits a strange rubbery charm as the long-limbed ingenue who hopes to improve herself in every direction ("They think I'm shallow at Bryn Mawr"); and Conrad Janis is most agreeable as her partner in romance.

"Visit to a Small Planet" has its inevitable sagging sections. The sequences wherein Kreton is supposed to be taking control of the world aren't very inventive or eventful, and the spaceman's attempt to convert the juvenile from pacifism to belligerence is long drawn out and irrelevant. Even here there are compensations, however, since Mr. Ritchard does a grand job of sentimentally intoning "Comin' in on a Wing and a Prayer."

A ramshackle show, but for the most part a very droll affair.

DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK'S PICTURE NEWSPAPER

February 8, 1957

'Visit to a Small Planet' Offers Crazy Humor and Performances

By JOHN CHAPMAN

I recommend a visit to "Visit to a Small Planet," which was produced at the Booth Theatre last evening, with the stipulation that you must not fret about the deficiency in the story line and the haziness of the point of view. There is in this comedy a delightful lot of screwball humor in the writing by Gore Vidal and in the acting by Cyril Ritchard and Eddie Mayehoff. Particularly by Mayehoff, whose performance as a frustrated and inhibited U. S. Army general is both hilarious and artful.

This comedy, expanded from a TV script, is an imaginative affair in which Ritchard comes from another planet to do a bit of sightseeing and to see or start a war. He thinks he has arrived in time to see the Civil War, which he expects will be jolly, but he has misjudged his landing and gets here in 1957. He tries to make the best of it.

Hasty, Perhaps

"Isn't hydrogen fun?" he gurgles, as he hears about modern warfare. Where he comes from, civilization has gone way beyond what we have here. They don't have babies any more, for instance, and he explains to us earthlings, "We gave it up. Some times I think we were a bit hasty."

This interplanetary visitor, who can read human minds and even have an enchanting conversation with a Siamese cat, plops himself into an average community whose population includes an average general, an average boy and girl in love, an average TV newscaster or oracle and an above-average cat.

What the stranger observes is often very funny because it is so obviously average, and playwright Vidal's idea is a bright one. Bright and satiric, too, are many of the scenes. The comedy fails to be something better than happy nonsense, however, because it reaches no particular conclusion about the state of civilization in 1957. Neither the author, Vidal, nor the strange visitor, Ritchard, ventures a constructive opinion as to what we should do with ourselves.

But there are some fine touches of madness in this comedy, many of which are supplied by Mayehoff in his performance of an up-from-the-ranks general who is in charge of laundry and who believes sincerely that laundry will win any war. Ritchard, of course, plays with great style and charm, and Philip Coolidge gives a happily cruel impersonation of the TV newscaster who can explain all world events in 15 minutes and deliver commercials, too.

The love interest, which is small, is carried pleasantly by Sarah Marshall and Conrad Janis. Ritchard directed the play. I think he directed a more pointed piece of nonsense when he staged "La Perichole" at the Metropolitan Opera.

Daily Mirror

February 8, 1957

Robert Coleman's THEATRE:

'Visit to Small Planet' Funny Science Satire

• Cyril Ritchard and Eddie Mayehoff make mediocre script seem enormously humorous.

Legend has it that the great Helena Modjeska once brought Edwin Booth to the verge of tears with a stirring rendition of a poem. Or, so Booth and his company thought. What the actress really did was recite the alphabet in her native Polish. Over the years, we've heard that oft told story with reservations.

But now we're convinced that it did happen. For Cyril Ritchard and Eddie Mayehoff turned a similar trick at the Booth Theatre Thursday evening. They made a mediocre little satire on science fiction seem enormously funny. They took a couple of roles that could have been cut from a telephone book, and gave them a gloss that passed for triumphant comedy.

THEIR VEHICLE, sponsored by George Axelrod and Clinton Wilder, is called "Visit to a Small Planet." It's from the typewriter of novelist Gore Vidal. It is, we understand, an elaboration of a script the author originally did for television. And that's not difficult to believe for it's as thin and transparent as a sheet of cellophane.

The marvelous Ritchard impersonates a visitor from outer space and time—and not Mars this time. He arrives in a motorless flying saucer in search of the Battle of Bull Run. For all his superior powers of concentration, he's miscalculated his century. However, he has the right location.

The wonderful Mayehoff is a bumbling general, nominally assigned to the laundry corps but temporarily transferred to UFO—or Unidentified Flying Objects—because none of his superiors wants the job. That clever character actor, Philip Coolidge, is a big-domed news commentator, who has the misfortune to have pooh-poohed space ships over the air-waves just prior to the descent of one in his garden.

The magnificent Ritchard gets the idea of taking over the world, of tossing hydrogen bombs around like tennis balls, but a precocious and sexy teen-ager—in the person of Herbert Marshall and Edna Best's beeyootiful daughter, Sarah Marshall—outwits the pixie playboy from the fourth dimension. It turns out that he is merely an adult juvenile delinquent from a peaceful and ultra-civilized sphere.

• • •

CONRAD JANIS, Sibyl Bowan, Bob Gothie, Francis Bethencourt and a slick Siamese cat named Grenadier Saadi, aid and abet Ritchard and Mayehoff in their super-foolery, which takes place in a tasteful Oliver Smith setting, under the inspired staging of the versatile Cyril.

If you're looking for substance, for credibility, "Visit to a Small Planet" is not your dish. But if you're of a mind to watch such facile farceurs as Ritchard and Mayehoff fashion hilarity out of ozone, then an evening at the Booth should prove fascinating.

Don't expect a play in the conventional sense, for there's no such animal prowling the premises. There's just a pair of magicians producing rib-wrecking laughs from a cockeyed comedy hat. Be content to settle for magnetic method instead of solid matter. And in this instance matter doesn't really matter.

Journal-American

February 8, 1957

Mayehoff Plus Ritchard Total Million Laughs

By JOHN McCLAIN

THERE WAS A LARGE injection of genius in the decision to couple Cyril Ritchard and Eddie Mayehoff in "Visit to a Small Planet" which opened at the Booth last night. For the delightful nonsense which results from Ritchard's effete and precious posturing, played against Mayehoff's bumptious barrel-house, had the clients in a state of giddy suspension for most of the evening.

Mr. Ritchard, who also directed, has exhibited his talent for the ridiculous before, but here he has a role in which he is able to employ his sense of mad elegance to the extreme; Mr. Mayehoff, too long absent from the local rat-race, is likewise given free rein to twist his plastic kisser into a thousand shapes, to indulge in not only double- but triple-takes, to allow his most pompous declarations to roll through the house in all their feeble grandeur. This is, so help me, an enormously funny show.

Strange Start

When the proceedings got under way, as Ritchard arrived on Earth from a larger planet dressed in a red tail coat and top hat, I had serious misgivings.

This had the feeling of one of those bright, TV-type ideas that would sustain for a hot half nour and then slowly subside, like a punctured accordion. But author Gore Vidal, aided by the immaculate services of his director and cast, keeps the ball in the air with amazing consistency.

It's an ambitious idea to regard the foibles of the world through the eyes of a visitor from a civilization which has risen above death, War and sex, yet I thought he managed to keep the thing crashing along at a merry rate without bothering too much with the obvious temptations of pointing morals or drawing parallels. His Space Man, however possessed of inhuman powers, is still less than perfect and aflame with sardonic humor. Ritchard's scene with a cat, whose language he understands, is one for the compendium.

Mayehoff Brilliant

Mayehoff brilliantly cast as a general, formerly in charge of laundry, who now unhappily finds himself stuck with the task of processing this recent arrival for the Pentagon, and the resulting episode is among the best. There are other moments, as there inevitably would be, when the humor becomes forced—but these lapses are infrequent.

In supporting roles Sarah Marshall is beguiling and decorative as the girl who saves the World; Philip Coolidge is a suave and insistent TV commentator, Sibyl Bowan is excellent as his wife, and Conrad Janis is a highly competent young non-conformist. Other laudable contributions are offered by Francis Bethencourt, and Bob Gothie.

Some quite eerie effects of a flying saucer landing on Earth have been devised by Louis and Bebe Barron and Oliver Smith's set of a polite drawing room in Manassas, Virginia, is practical and unpretentious. Mr. Ritchard has directed himself and everybody else with distinction.

This is certainly not the satire that is going to rock the universe, or even the World, but I'll guarantee you'll laugh.

The New York Times
February 8, 1957

The Theatre: 'Visit to a Small Planet'

Vidal's Foolish Notion Is Staged at Booth

By BROOKS ATKINSON

As a writer of comedy, Gore Vidal is foolish and funny, and his "Visit to a Small Planet," which opened at the Booth last evening, is uproarious.

Originally, it was a television script. Although Mr. Vidal has had to make it long enough for a full evening in the theatre, the padding does not show. For Eddie Mayehoff and Cyril Ritchard are on the stage, giving fantastic performances that make everything else invisible. Even if Mr. Vidal had stopped writing halfway through, the entertainment would go on under its own momentum, with Mr. Mayehoff and Mr. Richard clowning together.

•

Mr. Vidal has started them off beautifully. At a moment when Mr. Mayehoff, as Gen. Tom Powers, is boring a boring news commentator with his Pentagon gobbledegook, Mr. Ritchard swoops in from another part of the universe. Not Mars. "Oh, no!" he says with patronizing scorn. He comes from a part of the universe where human beings are omniscient and perfect, and our backward little world happens to be his hobby.

He settles down to enjoying it mischievously. Since the perfection of life where he lives is unbearably dull, he sets about provoking a world war because he knows that we are the masters of violence.

As a slapstick satirist, Mr. Vidal is a good man. He makes us look ridiculous in a low-comedy carnival that has its own insane logic and never runs out of ideas. Fortunately, his two top bananas are as versatile as he is.

Mr. Mayehoff can make dullness look and sound frighteningly hilarious. He has caught and assimilated the genius of dullness. He talks with a tight jaw, and as if his mouth were full of marbles. He screws his face into grimaces of dullness. He lets out little whines and grunts of pompous dullness, denoting the man of vacant mind who is thinking earnestly, and getting nowhere fast.

•

Give him a questionnaire to fill out and a series of rubber stamps to bang in quadruplicate and he can make the whole military system look odious and empty. Taking one thing with another, it is obvious that Mr. Mayehoff's characterization is a comic masterpiece. There is a future in politics or management for anyone who can master the cliché as brilliantly as he has.

It is a rule of the theatre that no one should direct a play in which he is starred. Mr. Ritchard has observed the rule by breaking it successfully. As director, he has staged a loud, swift-paced production in which every actor shines, every line is spoken with its funniest inflection and every piece of business is spontaneous and clear.

Inside a bright living-room setting by Oliver Smith, some excellent actors are in fine fettle. Philip Coolidge as a humorless TV commentator; Sibyl Bowan as a rattle-headed housewife who slaughters the language; Sarah Marshall as a college girl who studies art but majors in sex during the summer; Conrad Janis as a disillusioned patriot who prefers love to war—give lively, skillful performances.

As an actor, Mr. Ritchard is meticulously comic in the grand manner. He is the space-man who has made a hobby of this small planet and starts living it up as soon as he gets here. Extravagantly costumed in the period of our Civil War, he plays with great relish — relish of the stage as well as the play.

For Mr. Ritchard is all theatre. He poses, he mugs, he chuckles, he guffaws, he dances, and acts outrageously. But he is such a superb technician, he has such style and size that he is vastly amusing; and his performance is a comic masterpiece, too.

In both the writing and the playing, "Visit to a Small Planet" is a topsy-turvy lark that has a lot of humorous vitality. The tone is low; the entertainment is highly enjoyable.

"Le Misanthrope"

New York Herald Tribune
February 8, 1957

'Le Misanthrope'

By Bert McCord

A couple of years ago, Tennessee Williams looked into the matter of mendacity among men in "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof." Almost three hundred years back, Moliere took a sharp penetrating look at much the same phenomenon and set down his findings in the rhymed couplets of "Le Misanthrope," which the Barrault company brought to the Winter Garden Thursday night.

But back in the seventeenth century, life appears to have been a good deal more cut and dried than it is in these days of ids and egos and streams of consciousness. And in his play, Moliere achieved a clear cut picture of the flowery deceit and hypocrisy of society against which he sets the plain portrait of a man who insists upon being cast out rather than compromise his principles.

Jean-Louis Barrault, who has staged the comedy in a simple but strikingly handsome period setting by Pierre Delbee, plays the embittered misanthrope with sincerity as well as style, delivering the tirades against mankind with a savage indignation that is wholly convincing. Looking like an indoor d'Artagnan, he rises admirably to Alceste's raging moods when he is offended and subsides painfully into reluctant moues when embarrassed.

Celimene, the vivacious young coquette with whom Alceste is so ironically smitten, is played by Madeleine Renaud with charm and verve. With a flashing smile and a waist as waspish as you could ask for, Miss Renaud brings all of her artifices to the role. It is certainly ungallant to cavil about the matter of a lady's age, but the fact remains that last night Celimene gave the impression of a Maintenon holding court rather than an affected little flirt who was the cynosure of the salon, all of which detracted from the effect that Moliere seeks to obtain.

From his company as a whole, M. Barrault has extracted a classical, highly stylized performance calculated to unnerve the more dedicated disciples of the Actors' Studio. The actors flounce, sweep or stalk majestically on stage; they prance and swirl; the act of sitting down is a ceremonial to be accomplished with the most flamboyant gestures and waving of plumed hats; they bow low in obeisant humility or rise archly to their full height when insulted. It's all delicious fun.

Standout supporting performances were turned in by Pierre Bertin, who was simply magnificent as the pompous Oronte who insists that Alceste give him a frank opinion of the verses he has written, and by Natalie Nervel, as the sultry Arsinoe, the false friend of Celimene.

If you have ever longed to tell the truth when confronted with a lady's new hat or wanted to say what you really thought of a photograph of somebody's baby, you will have a fine time at "Le Misanthrope" and with the Barrault players who are obviously having a high old time of it themselves.

"LE MISANTHROPE"

Comedy in five acts by Moliere; staged by Jean-Louis Barrault; decor by Pierre Delbee; costumes by Marcel Escoffier; presented by Sol Hurok under the auspices of the Government of the French Republic at the Winter Garden Theatre, February 7, 1957. The cast:

Alceste.....Jean-Louis Barrault
Philinte.....Jean Desailly
Oronte.....Pierre Bertin
Celimene.....Madeleine Renaud
Eliante.....Simone Valere
Arsinoe.....Natalie Nerval
Acaste.....Jean-Pierre Granval
Clitandre.....Gabriel Cattand
Basque.....Jacques Galland
A Guard.....Andre Jobin
Du Bois.....Jean Juillard
A Valet.....Gerard Dournel

The New York Times

February 8, 1957

Moliere's 'Misanthrope'

Madeleine Renaud Is Star as Celimene

By HERBERT L. MATTHEWS

A GREAT classic and a great tradition of acting were brought to us last night by the Madeleine Renaud-Jean-Louis Barrault company. It was Molière's masterpiece, "Le Misanthrope," heard, of course, in the original French. Elsewhere in New York, at Theatre East, one can see and hear Richard Wilbur's effective and pleasant English version.

The vivid core of life is there in any language, for Molière exposed the human nature of every age, but the original has all the poetry, all the grace and wit, all the finesse of a great actor and director, as well as the greatest dramatist in the French language. Coming to us through three centuries of countless actings, and placed in the hands of such an expert company as this, it is like a flawless gem. This is the French stage in grand style.

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There is little that a company trained in the style of the Comedie Francaise, as these actors were, can do to make "Le Misanthrope" different—and little that they should do. One demands and gets something very familiar, but superbly acted.

This is the third of the plays given by the company, but it is the first in which Madeleine Renaud comes into her own. Her role of Célimène, one of the greatest in the French classic stage, is justly famous. She must have played Célimène hundreds of times. The part to her is like a familiar classic to a great pianist. She knows every nuance, every gesture, every expression, and they are all just right.

She is the eternal coquette who can only live surrounded by admirers in a school for scandal. The man who loves her with all his passionate and impossible heart is Alceste, the Misanthrope, the "atrabilious lover," honest, frank, sincere, generous—and utterly impossible. He asks too much of his mistress and of society, and so he ends in grief.

Modern actors, including M. Barrault's great master, Jacques Copeau, have often played Alceste as a tragic character. Molière evidently intended him to be comic. Barrault goes to neither extreme and makes a character that is funny and touching at the same time. It is worth anybody's time and money to go and see him and his wife, Mme. Renaud, play the wonderful scene in the fourth act where Alceste reproaches Célimène for flightiness and the coquette plays with him like a cat with a mouse until he ends in her power.

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There is no plot in the usual sense of the word, for hardly anything happens. This is a comedy of character and manners. It lives because of the raw passions and deep feelings that come through all the ridiculousness and over-refinements of the high society that Molière depicts.

The two other women are perfect in their parts, Simone Valère as good, quiet, sensible Eliante, Natalie Nerval as the bitter and catty prude, Arsinoe. Jean Desailly plays the grateful part of the friend, Philinte, with customary skill. Philinte is the man of the world, full of common sense and kindness, a complete foil to Alceste. Pierre Bertin as the poet, Oronte, and the two marquis are just as ridiculous as they should be, and they are given properly extravagant costumes by Marcel Escoffier.

The one scene is severe and simple, a drawing-room in gray and white, painted in classic style. The Winter Garden's stage is much too large for such an intimate play, but the company creates illusions of intimacy by some magic of M. Barrault's direction.

"Le Misanthrope" can be seen only until tomorrow night. These plays go almost as soon as they come. After all, it is a repertory company giving what M. Barrault calls "a rhythm of presentation." On Monday the company will present Armand Salacrou's drama of the French resistance, "Nights of Fury," on a double bill with Feydeau's "Dear Departed Mother-in-Law."

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

February 8, 1957

Moliere Play a Cure for Ulcers

By LOIS MAXON.

Best lesson in how to blow your stack stylishly that this town is likely to see for many a moon is currently being taught by Jean-Louis Barrault in the title role of Moliere's "Le Misanthrope," which opened last night at the Winter Garden. It is the third play to be presented this season by France's famed Madeleine Renaud-Jean-Louis Barrault repertory company in its present three-week engagement here and will be offered through Saturday evening.

Even the person without a word of French can enjoy this performance. In fact, doctors to present or potential ulcer patients should send them to study this example of the mercurial Gallic temperament on a rampage, with instructions to go out and do likewise. For, it's as inconceivable these players could harbor an ulcer as that they'd refuse a glass of wine.

Frankness Shown Up.

For those whose Moliere is not laurel green in memory, the plot is concerned with showing up frankness as the worst policy. Moliere suggests, in fact, that the hero's rantings against hypocricy are merely another form of attention-getting as false as the foppery of the other characters.

But as one who rages against the polite lie and insists upon frankness in everything, the misanthrope Alceste winds up losing the girl, a lawsuit and a noble friend, and is left alone in the end. Barrault flings himself so violently into Alceste's temper tantrums that one loses the beat of Moliere's poetry in all the passion. But Jean Desailly as the pacific friend, Philinte, gives each line its full measure of poetic rhythm, in mild and pleasant contrast to Barrault's tempestuous playing.

The mad success of the evening has both children and grandfathers in gleeful stitches. He is Pierre Bertin, who wrings every iota of mannered fun from the pompous part of Oronte, the nobleman who wit and poet would be, much to Alceste's chagrin. Oronte's broad playing is underlined by the flaming reds and oranges of his costume, a concoction exceeded in elegance only by Bertin's self-satsified smirk.

Pastel Marquises.

The two marquises, Acaste and Clitandre, are played with another variety of virtuosity by Jean-Pierre Granval and Gabriel Cattand, respectively. Their manner can be described only as pastel, violently aquiver. Garbed in silk, satin and lace and hatted with feathers, they fairly shimmer with nods and becks, with bows executed in triplicate, with laughs that trill all up and down the scale. Their performance supplies a vicarious workout that sets the liver right as rain.

Madeleine Renaud's flirtatious Celimene is ravishing, first in pink, then in blue, and gives another kind of French lesson in the graceful uses of a lace edged hankerchief with the pink, a languid fan with the blue. But her twittering coquette is topped by her clawing verbal duel with the prudish false friend and rival, Arsinoe, played by Natalie Nerval with almost visible venom.

Here, the visual peak of the evening is reached in the contrast of Arsinoe's plum colored costume with Celimine's blue against the gray boiserie of the Louis XIV set.

Barrault wrings real pathos from the final scene with Celimene when he almost persuades her to give up the world and marry him. And this one note of genuine emotion, of the tragic "almost," is the perfect conclusion, by contrast, to an evening all high style, exquisitely executed.

DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK'S PICTURE NEWSPAPER

February 8, 1957

A Sensitive 'Misanthrope' By Barraults

"Le Misanthrope," considered by many Moliere's masterpiece, was the third offering by the Renaud-Barrault Company of French players and presented last night at the Winter Garden by Sol Hurok and under the auspieces of the French Republic.

The social satire contains more character delineation than plot, but Moliere's work (he was writer, actor, director) was sensitively and beautifully interpreted by Jean-Louis Barrault (actor, director) and his group. Le Misanthrope is a character who believes in plain, honest speaking and indignation at the follies of society in the time of Louis XIV . . . and the bitter truth was no more popular at that time than it is today.

As with most sophisticated comedies, the charm is in the turn of phrases and small situations, but here let us add a most intriguing stage setting, three unusually beautiful women, Madeleine Renaud, Simone Valere and Natalie Nerval, and fine performances by Jean Desailly, Pierre Bertin, Jean-Pierre Granval and Gabriel Cattand.

—Georgia Chapman

New York Post

February 8, 1957

French Group Tops In Moliere Classic

"Le Misanthrope," Moliere's comic satire on the anti-social man, opened last night at the Winter Garden as the third and best program so far of the distinguished Madeleine Renaud-Jean-Louis Barrault group. Barrault has directed the comedy of manners with unflagging vitality and acts the principal role of the gruff Alceste.

In contrast to his dour bluntness, are the subtle femininity of Mme. Renaud as Celimene, the preciosity of Pierre Bertin as Oronte, and the quiet elegance of Jean Desailly as Philinte. The costumes are scintillating and the set is exquisite.

This is one program that should not be missed, particularly by students of Moliere. They are not likely to find a more brilliant production

F. H.

"Volpone"

New York Herald Tribune

February 5, 1957

THEATER

'Volpone'

By WALTER KERR

THERE may be some skeptics around who imagine that Jean-Louis Barrault is an actor of cool, precise, impeccably trained style—and not too much more. At first sight, the creaking monster who hobbles onstage in the company's current production of "Volpone" may seem to confirm that impression.

The business of casting the lithe and buoyant M. Barrault in the secondary role of the snuffling and slavering Corbaccio has all the earmarks of a stunt. The graceful agility we have come to expect is carefully and deliberately hidden beneath grotesquely weighted shoulders and fantastically arthritic bones. The liquid and lilting rat-a-tat French that normally races past us at breakneck speed is slowed to a wheezing and salivary growl.

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A great crooked claw swings wildly back and forth as this insanely greedy descendant of something out of Hansel and Gretel stumbles feverishly about Volpone's sickroom. When he jabs crooked fingers at the dirty cotton cap that seems to have vegetated on his skull, he is able to rip it off—only to reveal a head as bald and misshapen as an alligator's egg. When he chooses to gabble at any one of his conniving neighbors, his monumental nose and long, spiked jaw seem to work on one another like the claws of a busy and belligerent lobster.

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And there is in all this the constant danger of sheer exhibitionism, the risk that we shall be led to admire the ingenuity of the makeup rather than the superb malice of the character. But M. Barrault is one long thought ahead of us.

Behind the gnarled and grotesque facade are utterly steady, fiendishly intelligent eyes—and behind the eyes a mind that believes in every grasping gesture that is made. Watch Mr. Barrault venomously calculate the betrayal of his son, or have himself a jolly old time with a harlot, so long as his wind holds out, and you know that this grinning death's-head has really come out of a dingy room somewhere in the back-alleys of the city, has made his way along actual streets, and has had trouble getting up those off-stage stairs. The shape is distorted, but the dirty soul is patently real.

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Indeed the principal distinction of this Renaud-Barrault mounting of the Jules Romains variation on Ben Jonson lies in the realistic roots that give honesty and substance to a gallery of bold cartoons. Pierre Bertin is the Volpone of the evening: when, in his feigned illness, he lets forth a croak that seems to come from the sighing depths of a tired volcano, or when he blindly gropes for a friendly head to pat, the image of exhaustion seems brilliantly actual. And because it does—because we half-believe it—everything that follows is funny.

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Or consider the Mosca of Jean Desailly. This is a reasonable rogue, a trickster with a faint trace of a conscience from the beginning, a fellow who rubs the back of his neck in puzzlement at the latest shenanigans of his insatiable master and who watches the wicked world pass him with a wink that is part connivance and part dismay. The only outright vaudeville of the evening—it is good vaudeville, too—is Beauchamp's wispy and woebegone Judge. The brisk Voltore of Gabriel Cattand, the innocent Columba of Natalie Nerval, and the casual courtesan of Simone Valere are all soundly conceived portraits that have gradually and gracefully been blown into their ultimate antic disproportion.

The legitimacy of the knavery that goes on at the Winter Garden does cut down a bit on the enchanting visual styling that helps most of us get through a full evening in an alien tongue. But it is an admirable lesson in basic footwork: the caterpillar eyebrows and putty noses have been plastered on faces that are first of all familiar, and only subsequently fantastic.

"VOLPONE"

Play in five acts by Ben Jonson, adapted by Jules Romain from Stefan Zweig's German version; staged by Jean-Louis Barrault; decor and costumes by Andre Barasca; presented by Sol Hurok under the auspices of the Government of the French Republic at the Winter Garden Theatre, February 4, 1957. The cast:

Volpone	Pierre Bertin
Mosca	Jean Desailly
Voltore	Gabriel Cattand
Corvino	Georges Cusin
Corbaccio	Jean-Louis Barrault
Leone	Jean Juillard
The Judge	Beauchamp
Chief of Police	Dominique Rozan
Canina	Simone Valere
Colomba	Natalie Nerval

DAILY NEWS

February 5, 1957

'Volpone' in French Is Static and Jabbery

By JOHN CHAPMAN

The Renaud-Barrault company of Parisian actors offered "Volpone" at the Winter Garden last evening, and, except for three or four delightfully farcical moments, it was a static and jabbery production.

This "Volpone" is Jules Romains' French adaptation of Stefan Zweig's German adaptation of Ben Jonson's 17th Century English commentary—and a bitterly humorous one—about man's lust for pelf. I recall that Donald Wolfit's offering of this comedy many years ago was quite a lively affair, and so was the Theatre Guild's even earlier production with Alfred Lunt and satellites.

Little Movement

As the Frenchmen do it, it is mainly a conversation piece. The director, Jean-Louis Barrault, has become so bemused by the conversation that he has forgotten to remind his actors to move around a bit to stimulate their own and their audience's blood circulation. In the third of the five acts, three separate duologues are conducted from one little spot at stage right, and it becomes wearisome.

The actors are well costumed, well made-up and skillfully prepared for their jobs. Pierre Bertin's Volpone is a cheerfully sinister fake, and Jean Desailly makes a boyishly handsome but sufficiently devious plotter as Mosca. Simone Valere's Canina is frankly and delightfully sexy, and Barrault himself does a fine fat job of character acting as old Corbaccio. The scene in which he admires Mlle. Valere's necklace instead of her neck is hilariously impudent and worthy of the late Willie Howard.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

February 5, 1957

'Volpone' Speaks In Accents French

By TOM DONNELLY.

My high school French was considered outstandingly inadequate in a high school that was not noted for containing a preponderance of cosmopolitan types.

And there was an embarrassing scene in the Hall of Languages at the university one day when my venerable instructor, a native of Lyons, threw the pen of his aunt down upon his desk and cried, "Alors! Your pronunciation is not so bad " (I smirked.) He continued, "That is to say it is not so inferior as your grammar!" (He went on in this vein for some time, quite fiercely. Come to think of it, he may have been a professor from Alors who cried "Lyons!")

I revive these painful memories only by way of warning you that I am not precisely qualified to serve as an expert guide to the activities at the Winter Garden, where Madeleine Renaud and Jean-Louis Barrault and their company are doing a series of plays in the language of Voltaire.

However, last night's offering was a variation of Ben Jonson's "Volpone," and since I am familiar with that work in its original form, and since I can grasp a key French phrase here and there, it is not as if I were trying to pronounce upon the values of an entertainment utterly foreign to me like, say, an Elvis Presley concert.

A Version of a Version.

Besides, the "Volpone" at the Winter Garden is Jules Romains' version of Stefan Zweig's version, which is currently on display at the Rooftop Theater. That is to say, an English version of Zweig's version is at the Rooftop Theater.

The performance at the Winter Garden is generally light, dry, and attractive, and I was able to take pleasure in it because I was willing to make a necessary adjustment.

This is not the classic "Volpone," savage and glittering. It is a cooler proposition entirely, with an urbane charm of its own.

It is the peculiar gift of French actors to play with great broad strokes, and yet to create an illusion of something approaching delicacy. That is what most of the players in "Volpone" do, under the direction of M. Barrault.

Pierre Bertin is admirable in the title role. When he is pretending to be at death's door, the better to cheat the greedy gentlemen who hope to be mentioned in his will, M. Bertin gives forth with sighs as dry and rattling as a parched cornfield touched by a late August wind, and he is wonderfully comic as he caresses his gold while a troubadour sings to him.

The actor known simply as Beauchamp is gorgeously droll as the small wisp of a judge who presides over the big court scene, and M. Barrault is superb as the doddering money-lender, Corbaccio.

Barrault Leads a Fine Cast.

M. Barrault has contrived a make-up that is the epitome of theatrical senility. His bald head seems fabulously elongated, and his nose is long, too, like an extended turnip.

But M. Barrault does more than look the thing. With his laugh like a desperate hiss, and his palsied gestures, and his air of avarice raised to its highest power, he IS the thing.

The others are effective, too, except for Jean Desailly as Mosca. M. Desailly is a young gentleman with what astonishingly resembles an American crew-cut, and his Mosca is totally lacking in color, guile, and impact. He seems to be a nice boy in the Venetian equivalent of a gray flannel suit, earnestly trying to get ahead.

Daily Mirror
February 5, 1957

Robert Coleman's THEATRE:

French Troupe Offers Enjoyable 'Volpone'

• First-nighters impressed by Barrault's gripping portrayal.

The Madeleine Renaud and Jean-Louis Barrault Company followed its wonderful opening bill, "Christophe Colomb," with a lively performance of "Volpone" Monday evening at the Winter Garden. The latter has been adapted for the French stage by Jules Romains, after Stefan Zweig's lusty re-working of the Ben Jonson original.

Romains has kept the famous characters, and stuck closely to the Zweig outline, but softened the ending. Mosca turns out to be a pretty good fellow. After tricking the larcenous and lecherous Volpone into willing him his fortune, the reformed parasite makes amends to the arch-villain's victims.

AS FOR THE Old Fox, who had swindled the greedy and gullible with his promises to leave them the ill-gotten gains, Mosca, the pupil, lets his master off with less savage punishment than Jonson and Zweig doled out to him. Volpone is forced into exile with only the garments he wears, sans a lengthy stay in the pokey. But, perhaps, penury is punishment enough for the wily charlatan.

Barrault not only directed, but played Corbaccio, the aged money-lender, with humorous effect. It was a character portrait that gripped the attention of the first-nighters.

Pierre Bertin was admirable as the crafty Volpone, who outsmarted himself along with others. Jean Desailly was less oily and unctuous, more likeable than most Moscas. Gabriel Cattand, and George Cusin were very funny as the too clever notary, Voltore, and the rich and jealous merchant, Corvino.

We particularly liked Jean Juillard as the lusty and vengeful Leone, who would turn malefactors over to justice after punching them around a bit; and Natalie Nerval, as the shy Colomba, whose spouse would sacrifice her honor for a pocketful of ducats. Beauchamp and Dominique Rozan were others outstanding in the skillful cast.

UNFORTUNATELY, THERE was no role for the gifted Mme. Barrault (Madeleine Renaud). Barrault's staging was swiftly paced and beautifully detailed. Andre Barsacq's sets and costumes were indeed smart.

The Renaud-Barrault company, in our opinion, has far surpassed its first season in Manhattan so far. Its choice of repertoire has been more rewarding, and its productions infinitely more stunning.

Last season S. Hurok gave us the august Comedie Francaise. That is supposed to be the finest acting company in France. It is subsidized by the government. It has a magnificent history. But, for our money, we'll take the unsubsidized Renaud-Barrault troupe right now.

Pierre Runis, Mayor of Paris, spent his second evening over here as the guest of Hurok at the Winter Garden. The Mayor knows a good thing, whether it be in Paris or New York.

Journal-American
February 5, 1957

Bitingly Hilarious Time

By JOHN McCLAIN

THE BRILLIANT French repertory company of Madeleine Renaud and Jean-Louis Barrault and their attendant players last night presented "Volpone," the second offering in their current series at the Winter Garden. This is an adaptation of the original Ben Jonson play by Jules Romains and Stefan Zweig, and as presently performed it is a bitingly hilarious evening in the theatre.

No English is spoken, except by the ushers, but the pantomime is such that even the most faltering linguist, catching perhaps one word in five, will have little difficulty in following the action. The play is magnificently mounted, there is some attractive background music by Georges Auric, and the cast is uniformly excellent.

Madeleine Renaud doesn't appear in this one but M. Barrault has a fine field day as Corbaccio, giving up the title role to his capable colleague, Pierre Bertin. Jean Desailly is a vigorous and compelling Mosca, and other notable contributions are offered by Georges Cusin, Gabriel Cattand, Jean Juillard, Beauchamp, Dominique Rozan, Simone Valere and Natalie Nerval.

It seemed to me that this is the type of play which best lends itself to the French-speaking theatre, combining as it does ribaldry and philosophy, and this adaptation, especially, gives free reign to the more humorous aspects of avarice and lechery as practiced across the pond in the 17th Century.

Volpone, the aging miser, feigns illness to mulct gifts from his false friends and even endeavors to lure one of their wives into the feathers. A hassle ensues and everybody is haled into court, where Volpone is cleared and the wrong people sentenced.

Even so, there is still a squabble over those to be remembered in Volpone's will, and he plays dead to rejoice in the general disappointment when all his money goes to Mosca, his servant. He gets his come-uppance, however, when Mosca grabs the loot and kicks him out of his own house.

Ample Freedom

If that is a not entirely satisfactory run-down of the proceedings you will have to remember that this deponent was not raised by a French governess but was taught the language by the idiotic system which required thorough knowledge of written subjunctives but never provided the student with the conversational ability to ask or understand the way to the nearest smoking room.

Be that as it may, this is an enormously gifted French company, and "Volpone" gives them ample freedom to exercise their talents. It will be performed again tonight and tomorrow afternoon and evening; Thursday night the company opens "Le Misanthrope," which will occupy them for the remainder of the week.